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ABSTRACT

A study examined two methods of reading instruction, the whole language literature-based approach and the traditional basal approach. Eighty teachers from four diverse school districts in two midwestern states were surveyed to find out which method was the most widely used. Results indicated that 84% of the 50 teachers who responded used a combination approach. The teachers believed that by using key aspects of each approach, a more powerful tool for reading instruction would result. (RS)

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Whole Language and Traditional Reading Instruction: A Comparison of Teacher Views and Techniques

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Running head: WHOLE LANGUAGE AND TRADITIONAL READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine two methods of reading instruction, the whole language literature-based approach and the traditional basal approach. Teachers from four diverse school districts were surveyed to find out which method was the most widely used. It was determined from the results of the survey that 84% of the responding teachers used a combination approach. The teachers believed that by using key aspects of each approach, a more powerful tool for reading instruction would be the result.

Whole Language and Traditional Reading Instruction:

A Comparison of Views and Techniques

Basal reading series have dominated reading programs in the United States for many years. These series contain teacher's manuals to guide each lesson, student books which contain stories with controlled vocabulary, workbooks with drill and practice activities for skills being taught, charts flashcards, and tests. They typically reflect a phonics approach by explicitly teaching letter/sound correspondences and phonics rules.

. Whole language, on the other hand, is an approach that teaches reading as a holistic activity. An emphasis is placed on meaning and reading is not broken into separate skills. Whole texts are used as well as songs, poems, signs, and labels.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether a whole language literature-based approach is the most preferred method of reading instruction used by classroom teachers..

Whole language is an approach that teaches reading as a holistic activity. Reading is always treated as an integrated behavior and is never broken into separate skills. The emphasis is always placed on meaning, and materials are expected to be real and relevant. (Goodman and Goodman, 1981) Whole texts, many student selected, are used from the very beginning of reading instruction.

The theory behind whole language does not confine itself to reading instruction. The underlying concept is that all of the language arts are related and should not be taught as if they were separate subjects. Whole language endorses integrating reading and writing instruction with content area subjects as well. (Heymsfeld, 1989)

The main focus of a whole language reading program is the use of quality literature. Literature includes picture books, folk tales, fables, myths, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, fiction and nonfiction. According to Routman (1989), there are many valid reasons for using literature as the focus of a reading program. Literature allows meaning to dominate. Children read for meaning and readable books are predictable in words and outcomes. A story that makes sense is easy to talk about and remember.

By using literature, teachers concentrate on the development of readers rather that the development of skills.

Literature promotes positive self-concepts in beginning readers. When students see themselves as readers of books from the start, they will develop positive attitudes about reading and themselves. Early success and confidence will flow into other academic and social areas of their lives. On the other hand, failure to learn to read can carry lifelong scars.

Literature promotes language deyelopment. Exposure to a variety of complex syntactical patterns, creative and figurative language, and imagery found in good literature aids in the comprehension of language and enhances vocabulary development.

Literature promotes fluent reading. When children hear a predictable story as a whole first, they will come to know phrasing and imitate it. When predicting and sampling are encouraged, they will get accustomed to filling in words that make sense. In turn, this skill will occur as they read other stories.

Literature deals with human emotions. Children can meet

characters in books who have traits like themselves, which makes them feel more at ease with their feelings. Folk tales and fairy tales can teach a lot about conflicts, failings, individual longings, etc., and can stimulate thoughtful discussions.

Literature exposes students to a variety of story structures, themes, and authors' styles. Children will begin to internalize how stories work and come to understand setting, characterization, and plot. Children who hear and read a variety of fiction and nonfiction literature should have no difficulty modeling authors' styles, and love writing and illustrating their own stories.

Literature puts children in contact with illustration at its best. Beautiful illustrations that stand on their own as art are often a component of favorite books. Wordless picture books tell their stories totally through the detailed illustrations. These can be used creatively with pre-readers as well as older children and can inspire them to create their own.

Basal readers typically reflect a phonics approach to reading by explicitly teaching letter/sound correspondences and phonics rules.

Basal reader materials generally are a series of books and supplementary materials designed to stimulate a systematic development of reading skills. These series provide a carefully sequenced presentation of skills, continuity of all skills through the grades, and an integration of materials and skills to facilitate independent learning. Basal series are usually organized to provide gradual progression to more difficult steps and a gradual broadening of children's conceptions of social organization, vocabulary, word analysis skills, and evaluative abilities. (Zintz and Maggart, 1984)

Publishers of basal reading series provide teachers with readiness materials, placement tests for each level of achievement, mastery tests for each level of achievement, sets of overhead transparencies for skill development, books, cassette tapes, duplicating masters for seatwork and teacher materials for additional learning aids.

All lessons in the basal series are already created for teachers to follow. The term "teacher directed reading activities" has been given to these lessons. Teacher directed reading lessons usually consist of a five step plan; motivating interest, teaching new vocabulary, guiding the

silent reading of the story, interpreting the story, and providing related activities for phonic analysis and comprehension skills.

According to Heymsfeld (1989), children who are taught phonics get off to a better start in learning to read than children who are not taught phonics. She also states that while some children may discover this principle by themselves, the research evidence over the past seventy years indicates overwhelmingly that direct instruction is needed and contributes to better development of decoding, word recognition, and comprehension.

Method

A total of four districts were selected for a questionnaire. The cluster sample, from two Midwest states, was chosen for the wide range of socioeconomic and cultural diversity among them. The first district selected was a wealthy bedroom community on the outskirts of one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. The second district selected was a typical small city setting ranging from government housing to large one-family homes; from large nationwide industries to struggling small businesses. The third district was a small rural farming community

which hasn't passed a school levy in nine years. The final district was located in the heart of coal mining country and was referred to as one of the poorest districts in the state.

Twenty questionnaires were mailed and distributed to each of the four districts. Fifty questionnaires were returned. The majority, 92%, of the responding teachers were regular classroom teachers of grades kindergarten through the sixth grade. Three teachers were special needs teachers and one was an art teacher. The years of experience for the teachers ranged from two to thirty years with a mean of 15.46 (SD=8.17).

Each teacher received a one page questionnaire specially designed by the researchers to note the teachers' attitudes and preferences toward whole language and the skill based-basal approach to language acquisition.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section asked questions such as grade level taught, years of experience, and the name of the school district in which they teach. The second section focused on the teaching techniques and strategies they preferred in their own classrooms. In the third section, the teachers were asked to rank

nine components of language acquisition in order of importance.

Results

The questionnaire asked each teacher to rate themselves according to personal teaching style preferences. A Liekert scale was used as a continuum to show the fluency from one style to the other. According to the designed scale, the number one was circled if the teacher considered himself/herself to be a whole language teacher, and a number five for the skill based approach. The numbers between represented a combination of both teaching styles.

The research showed that 84% of the teachers surveyed preferred to use a combination of whole language and the basal approach in their classrooms. Using the Liekert scale with the number one representing completely whole language and the number five representing completely basal instruction, the research showed a mean of 2.16 (SD=.468). Only eight of the fifty teachers considered themselves completely whole language, and no one considered themselves completely basal.

The final section of the questionnaire asked the teachers to rank nine components of language acquisition in order of importance.

The results of the study indicated the order was as follows: comprehension, listening skills, writing skills, vocabulary, speaking skills, phonics, silent reading, spelling, and finally oral reading.

Discussion

After decades of debate and research, substantial disagreement remains among educators as to what beginning reading instruction should be like. Teachers are constantly being reprimanded for their failure to make children literate. They are urged to stop using the "wrong" method and concentrate on using the "right" method of teaching children to read. The question is which is "right"? Currently the basal phonic approach is in serious opposition to the literature-based whole language approach. Each approach takes a conflicting view about how children learn.

According to Smith (1992), advocates of the basal phonic approach have the "official" view of learning because it is virtually the standard view in education. This view reflects that learning takes place sporadically, in small amounts as a result of a solitary individual effort, and when properly organized and rewarded. Students must have a deliberate intention to learn and must give learning their full attention.

This view also believes that learning is transient and most of what is learned is likely to be quickly forgotten unless rehearsed repeatedly.

The advocates of a whole language approach have what Smith (1992) calls and "informal" view of learning. This group views learning as continuous, spontaneous, and effortless, requiring no particular attention, conscious motivation, or specific reinforcement. This view stresses that learning occurs in all kinds of situations and is not subject to forgetting.

For as long as there have been records of organized reading instruction, the emphasis has been on teaching the sounds of letters. There is no compelling evidence that teaching children phonics, through the use of a basal, makes them "readers". The rules of phonics are too complex and too unreliable to be useful. (Smith, 1992) Nevertheless, reams of research claim to show that basal reader phonics should be the method of choice in teaching reading.

The studies on which claims for the efficacy of basal reader phonics in teaching reading are based often compare children taught by one method with children taught by another method on criteria that fall short of actual reading. The studies are frequently conducted by experimenters

who use a mechanistic approach to learning. Word identification rather than comprehension is usually the focus. Reading is seen as decoding symbols into sounds rather than as unlocking meaning, and there is almost always an underlying assumption that one way or another children must learn phonics. (Smith 1992)

Despite such conflicting research claims, many teachers feel that at least some phonics instruction is essential. The first reason being that letters are such and obvious part of written language. It is often believed that learning the correspondences of letters and sounds will produce "readers".

A second explanation for the continuous appeal of phonics is a fear that children will not learn to read if their learning is not organized down to the smallest detail. It is often believed that children cannot be left to choose what and when they will learn although they make these choices perfectly well when learning to talk and make sense of their world. It is a theory of innate wickedness, going back centuries, that left to their own devices, children will resist learning. As a result, children must be "instructed" in a proper climate of authority and retribution. (Smith 1992)

According to Smith (1992), no research is available on how many phonics rules children are capable of learning before they have begun to read, but it cannot be many and they would certainly not be of much. It is always the nonreaders who have trouble with phonics. The blame is always put on these children for being "dyslexic or for having other kinds of "specific learning disabilities". All are diagnosed by the fact that the children failed to read on the basis of basal phonic instruction. Or, their teachers are blamed for not having tried hard enough or for having used the wrong method.

The enemy of the basal approach is the literature-based whole language approach. If regarded simply as "another method"of instruction, whole language will not succeed in teaching children to read. It is not a beneficial approach when confused teachers are required to adapt whole language instruction to traditional classroom structures and situations. Unfortunately, large numbers of teachers regard whole language as just "another method". They still do not trust children to learn unless their attention is controlled and their progress monitored and evaluated.

The original philosophy of whole language had nothing to do with methods, materials, or techniques. There was not an attempt to tell teachers what they should do to teach children to read; rather, the aim was to tell teachers what their attitudes should be. The basis of the philosophy was "respect for language" (which should be natural and authentic, not contrived and fragmented) and "respect for learners" (who should be engaged in meaningful and productive activities, not pointless drills and rote memorization). (Smith, 1992)

Basal reading companies are continuously trying to update themselves with the emergence of the whole language approach to reading. They are starting to contain better literature, poems, and songs. Teachers can pick and choose from the basal stories to supplement their whole language themes and units. Notice the use of the word "supplement". Basal stories and activity "ideas" should be used to supplement a whole language approach. There is no real purpose to the extensive use of workbooks and supplemental worksheets. Children do need to be armed with strategies for reading. The phonic strategies that are taught through the basal readers can be taught using authentic literature. The sequencing

of skills presented in basal series is very beneficial to teachers and would be more meaningful when applied to good children's literature.

Routman (1991) states, "Whole language is not just about giving up the basal. Rather, it is about having teachers and students decide together what is worth knowing and how to come to know it. It is about setting up a learning environment that is purposeful, authentic, and based on both the children's and teachers' needs and desires to know." She has a good point.

The results of research , teaching experience, and common sense all point in the same direction-a need for balance and moderation. Of the teachers participating in this study, 84% believe that whole language is a way of teaching that brings energy and excitement to reading and other subjects of the curriculum. Those teachers believe that by teaching phonics and reading comprehension, they have a powerful tool for educating children.

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